

# A Woman's Self-Esteem

## Struggles and Triumphs in the Search for Identity

Nathaniel Branden

---

### Chapter 2: Living Consciously

Some years ago, Serena, a management consultant of 49, said to me, "I think there are very few major surprises about the man you marry -- if you pay attention from the beginning. Through their behavior, most people announce who and what they are pretty clearly. Trouble is, often we don't care to look. Or we're lost in wishful thinking. Possibly we're controlled by our need or our loneliness. We create a fantasy and then get angry with our husband because he's not the fantasy -- which he never pretended to be. But if we're willing to look without blinders, if we're willing to see everything that's there to be seen -- and if we still love passionately--that's what I call mature romantic love."

I perceived her as a woman of extraordinarily high self-esteem, and one of the reasons was revealed in her statement: she was a person who lived consciously. She exhibited respect for reality. She operated with a high level of awareness. No practice is more self-empowering -- and it is not difficult to see why. Living consciously is both a cause of self-esteem and an effect. The more you live consciously, the more you trust your mind and respect your worth. The more you trust your mind and respect your worth, the more natural it feels to live consciously.

If (in effect) we date unconsciously, marry unconsciously, and interact with our partner unconsciously, there will be two predictable casualties: the first will be to our self-esteem and the second will be to our relationship.

"But what about romance?" a woman in psychotherapy asked me. "Where's the excitement if you're that conscious of everything?"

"You mean it's not exciting if you know what you're doing?" I responded, and she smiled sheepishly.

The fact is, many people do act as if consciousness were undesirable. Not only because operating consciously requires an effort they may not care to expend, but also because heightened awareness can bring us into contact with facts we prefer not to face. If we prefer to ignore the danger signals Mr. Wrong is emitting, then we can suffer the drama of a new romance, followed by the drama of shock and disillusionment, followed by the drama of bitterness and grief, followed by the heady excitement of playing the story all over again with some new Mr. Wrong. Audiences often laugh when I point out this pattern -- with "the shock of recognition." Someone else called out, jokingly, "Who wants to give up the thrills and the heartache?" The answer is: women who know that love and happiness are better served by sight than by blindness.

Sometimes our insecurities make the exercise of consciousness difficult. "If I were willing to admit what I know and not kid myself," a woman in therapy said to me, "I

could never remain with Walter. But I'm scared I won't be able to do any better, so I shut my eyes and make myself stupid." Another client, Elsie, age 35, farther along in her therapy, announced proudly, "I met this terribly attractive guy in the office, and we went out for coffee. The way he talked about women he had been involved with told me this is not a man who likes women. So I had to make a choice: to proceed against that knowledge and set myself for future pain -- or drop him right now. I decided I've had enough suffering in my life. I told him very nicely I wasn't interested."

In addition to my psychotherapy practice, I work as a consultant to business organizations. At every level of an organization it is easy to see who are the people operating at peak awareness and who are mentally coasting. You can note it in the questions they ask (or don't ask), and in their hunger to expand the range of their competence (or their avoidance of any non-obligatory effort). When Marvel, age 34, was hired for a new job in an insurance firm she did everything she could to master what was required of her and kept looking for ways to perform her tasks more efficiently. Beyond that, she sought to understand the wider context in which her work took place, so that she would be qualified to move up and not be stuck indefinitely on the level where she started. Her basic desire was to learn-and thereby to keep growing in confidence, productiveness, and competence.

When Angie, age 40, was hired by the same firm, she imagined that if she memorized the routine of the tasks assigned to her and didn't attract negative attention, she might hope for security. Challenges had no appeal for her. All her thoughts centered on her desire for a "hassle-free" life. She operated at the minimal level of awareness necessary to carry out her basic duties, contributing nothing of her own. Her interests, she thought, lay not in what she did at work, but what she did after work, socializing with her friends. Her gaze rarely strayed from her workstation. She felt no curiosity about how her job fitted in to the overall context of the company. She kept a small clock in front of her so that she would know precisely when it was five o'clock and time to go home. When she was confronted by her supervisor with mistakes she had made, she typically alibied and inwardly seethed. But when Marvel was promoted and she was not, Angie felt bewildered and resentful.

Apart from the practical consequences for their careers, Marvel's and Angie's policies necessarily have consequences for their self-esteem, in the first instance straightening it and in the second, eroding it.

Angie, of course, represents an extreme, but her basic pattern is one that can be found in varying degrees. We can be significantly more conscious in the workplace than Angie, yet nowhere near our potential. If 10 is optimal consciousness and Angie is, say, a 2- where would you place yourself?

A powerful technique for stimulating self-awareness, self-development, and self-healing is sentence-completion work. In my therapy practice I typically give homework assignments in which-if the project is to learn to operate at a high level of awareness -- I ask people to write six to ten endings, each morning for a week or two, for the following stems:

*If I were to bring 5 percent more consciousness to my daily activities --*

*If I were to bring 5 percent more consciousness to my choices and Actions --*

*If I were to bring 5 percent more consciousness to my important relationships --*

*The hard thing about operating consciously is --*

*The rewards for operating consciously might be --*

*I am becoming aware --*

When doing this exercise one does not stop to "think" (rehearse, censor); one writes as rapidly as possible-the only assignment being to write a grammatical completion for the sentence stem. If you get stuck, *invent* -- write *anything* but write *something*.

If you choose to do this exercise daily for the next two weeks, you may be astonished at how much you learn-and what possibilities open for you. For much more on the practice of living consciously, see not but also *The Art of Living Consciously*. Both only *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* books contain considerable theoretical elaboration of the idea of operating consciously and also many exercises to assist the reader in cultivating that practice in her everyday life.